THE SIGN OF THE SHADOW

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A Short Story of Arsene Lupin from the collection:
1912

THE CONFESSIONS
OF ARSÈNE LUPIN
By

MAURICE LeBLANC

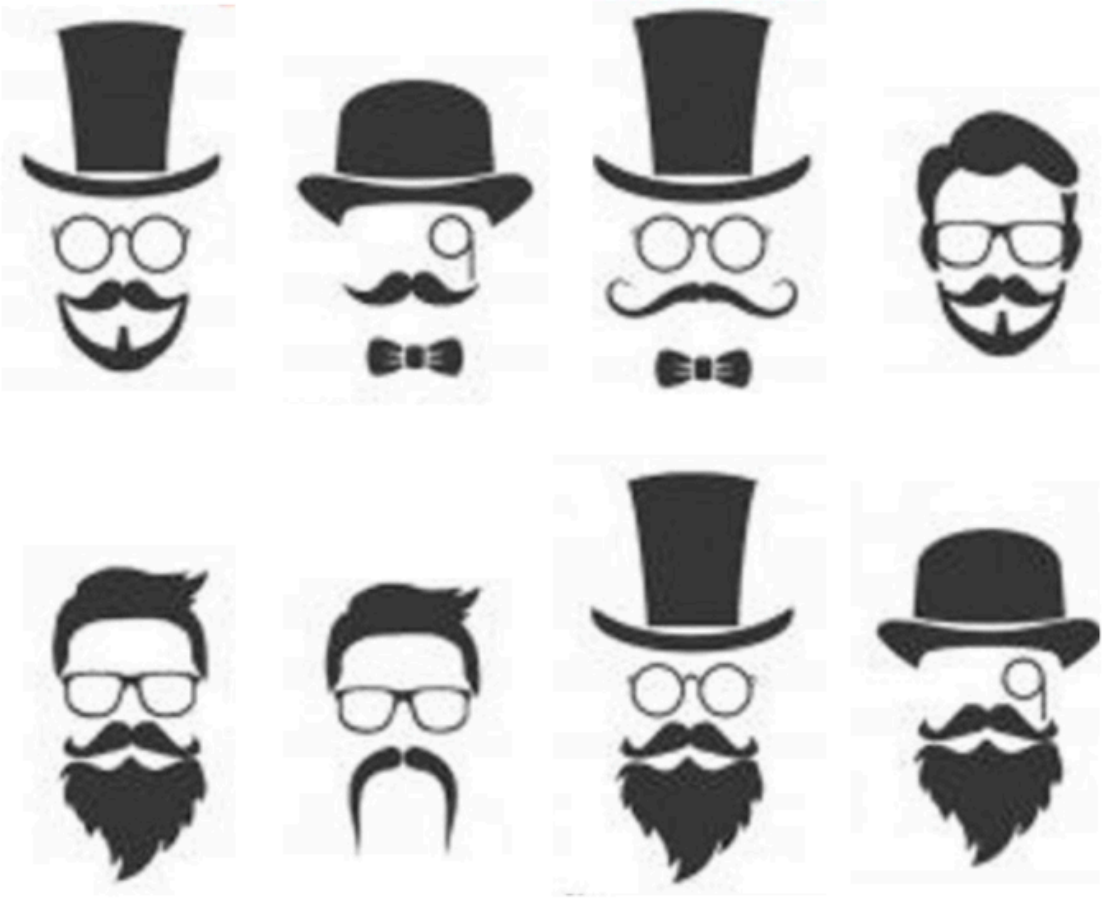
THE MANY DISGUISES
OF

Arsène Lupin

The Gentleman Burglar

THE SIGN OF THE SHADOW

The Confessions of Arsène Lupin



SERIES STORY No. III

THE SIGN OF THE SHADOW

I received your telegram and here I am," said a gentleman with a grey moustache, who entered my study, dressed in a dark-brown frock-coat and a wide-brimmed hat, with a red ribbon in his buttonhole. "What's the matter?"

Had I not been expecting Arsène Lupin, I should certainly never have recognized him in the person of this old half-pay officer:

"What's the matter?" I echoed. "Oh, nothing much: a rather curious coincidence, that's all. And, as I know that you would just as soon clear up a mystery as plan one...."

"Well?"

"You seem in a great hurry!"

"I am ... unless the mystery in question is worth putting myself out for. So let us get to the point."

"Very well. Just begin by casting your eye on this little picture, which I picked up, a week or two ago, in a grimy old shop on the other side of the river. I bought it for the sake of its Empire frame, with the palm-leaf ornaments on the mouldings ... for the painting is execrable."

"Execrable, as you say," said Lupin, after he had examined it, "but the subject itself is rather nice. That corner of an old courtyard, with its rotunda of Greek columns, its sun-dial and its fish-pond and that ruined well with the Renascence roof and those stone steps and stone benches: all very picturesque."

"And genuine," I added. "The picture, good or bad, has never been taken out of its Empire frame. Besides, it is dated.... There, in the left-hand bottom corner: those red figures, 15. 4. 2, which obviously stand for 15 April, 1802."

"I dare say ... I dare say.... But you were speaking of a coincidence and, so far, I fail to see...."

I went to a corner of my study, took a telescope, fixed it on its stand and pointed it, through the open window, at the open window of a little room facing my flat, on the other side of the street. And I asked Lupin to look through it.

He stooped forward. The slanting rays of the morning sun lit up the room opposite, revealing a set of mahogany furniture, all very simple, a large bed and a child's bed hung with cretonne curtains.

"Ah!" cried Lupin, suddenly. "The same picture!"

"Exactly the same!" I said. "And the date: do you see the date, in red? 15. 4. 2."

"Yes, I see.... And who lives in that room?"

"A lady ... or, rather, a workwoman, for she has to work for her living ... needlework, hardly enough to keep herself and her child."

"What is her name?"

"Louise d'Ernemont.... From what I hear, she is the great-granddaughter of a farmer-general who was guillotined during the Terror."

"Yes, on the same day as André Chénier," said Lupin. "According to the memoirs of the time, this d'Ernemont was supposed to be a very rich man." He raised his head and said, "It's an interesting story.... Why did you wait before telling me?"

"Because this is the 15th of April."

"Well?"

"Well, I discovered yesterday—I heard them talking about it in the porter's box—that the 15th of April plays an important part in the life of Louise d'Ernemont."

"Nonsense!"

"Contrary to her usual habits, this woman who works every day of her life, who keeps her two rooms tidy, who cooks the lunch which her little girl eats when she comes home from the parish school ... this woman, on the 15th of April, goes out with the child at ten o'clock in the morning and does not return until nightfall. And this has happened for years and in all weathers. You must admit that there is something queer about this date which I find on an old picture, which is inscribed on another, similar picture and which controls the annual movements of the descendant of d'Ernemont the farmer-general."

"Yes, it's curious ... you're quite right," said Lupin, slowly. "And don't you know where she goes to?"

"Nobody knows. She does not confide in a soul. As a matter of fact, she talks very little."

"Are you sure of your information?"

"Absolutely. And the best proof of its accuracy is that here she comes."

A door had opened at the back of the room opposite, admitting a little girl of seven or eight, who came and looked out of the window. A lady appeared behind her, tall, good-looking still and wearing a sad and gentle air. Both of them were ready and dressed, in clothes which were simple in themselves, but which pointed to a love of neatness and a certain elegance on the part of the mother.

"You see," I whispered, "they are going out."

And presently the mother took the child by the hand and they left the room together.

Lupin caught up his hat:

"Are you coming?"

My curiosity was too great for me to raise the least objection. I went downstairs with Lupin.

As we stepped into the street, we saw my neighbour enter a baker's shop. She bought two rolls and placed them in a little basket which her daughter was carrying and which seemed already to contain some other provisions. Then they went in the direction of the outer boulevards and

followed them as far as the Place de l'Étoile, where they turned down the Avenue Kléber to walk toward Passy.

Lupin strolled silently along, evidently obsessed by a train of thought which I was glad to have provoked. From time to time, he uttered a sentence which showed me the thread of his reflections; and I was able to see that the riddle remained as much a mystery to him as to myself.

Louise d'Ernemont, meanwhile, had branched off to the left, along the Rue Raynouard, a quiet old street in which Franklin and Balzac once lived, one of those streets which, lined with old-fashioned houses and walled gardens, give you the impression of being in a country-town. The Seine flows at the foot of the slope which the street crowns; and a number of lanes run down to the river.

My neighbour took one of these narrow, winding, deserted lanes. The first building, on the right, was a house the front of which faced the Rue Raynouard. Next came a moss-grown wall, of a height above the ordinary, supported by buttresses and bristling with broken glass.

Half-way along the wall was a low, arched door. Louise d'Ernemont stopped in front of this door and opened it with a key which seemed to us enormous. Mother and child entered and closed the door.

"In any case," said Lupin, "she has nothing to conceal, for she has not looked round once...."

He had hardly finished his sentence when we heard the sound of footsteps behind us. It was two old beggars, a man and a woman, tattered, dirty, squalid, covered in rags. They passed us without paying the least attention to our presence. The man took from his wallet a key similar to my neighbour's and put it into the lock. The door closed behind them.

And, suddenly, at the top of the lane, came the noise of a motor-car stopping.... Lupin dragged me fifty yards lower down, to a corner in which we were able to hide. And we saw coming down the lane, carrying a little dog under her arm, a young and very much over-dressed woman, wearing a quantity of jewellery, a young woman whose eyes were too dark, her lips too red, her hair too fair. In front of the door, the same performance, with the same key.... The lady and the dog disappeared from view.

"This promises to be most amusing," said Lupin, chuckling. "What earthly connection can there be between those different people?"

There hove in sight successively two elderly ladies, lean and rather poverty-stricken in appearance, very much alike, evidently sisters; a footman in livery; an infantry corporal; a fat gentleman in a soiled and patched jacket-suit; and, lastly, a workman's family, father, mother, and four children, all six of them pale and sickly, looking like people who never eat their fill. And each of the newcomers carried a basket or string-bag filled with provisions.

"It's a picnic!" I cried.

"It grows more and more surprising," said Lupin, "and I sha'n't be satisfied till I know what is happening behind that wall."

To climb it was out of the question. We also saw that it finished, at the lower as well as at the upper end, at a house none of whose windows overlooked the enclosure which the wall contained.

During the next hour, no one else came along.

We vainly cast about for a stratagem; and Lupin, whose fertile brain had exhausted every possible expedient, was about to go in search of a

ladder, when, suddenly, the little door opened and one of the workman's children came out.

The boy ran up the lane to the Rue Raynouard. A few minutes later he returned, carrying two bottles of water, which he set down on the pavement to take the big key from his pocket.

By that time Lupin had left me and was strolling slowly along the wall. When the child, after entering the enclosure, pushed back the door Lupin sprang forward and stuck the point of his knife into the staple of the lock. The bolt failed to catch; and it became an easy matter to push the door ajar.

"That's done the trick!" said Lupin.

He cautiously put his hand through the doorway and then, to my great surprise, entered boldly. But, on following his example, I saw that, ten yards behind the wall, a clump of laurels formed a sort of curtain which allowed us to come up unobserved.

Lupin took his stand right in the middle of the clump. I joined him and, like him, pushed aside the branches of one of the shrubs. And the sight which presented itself to my eyes was so unexpected that I was unable to suppress an exclamation, while Lupin, on his side, muttered, between his teeth:

"By Jupiter! This is a funny job!"

We saw before us, within the confined space that lay between the two windowless houses, the identical scene represented in the old picture which I had bought at a second-hand dealer's!

The identical scene! At the back, against the opposite wall, the same Greek rotunda displayed its slender columns. In the middle, the same

stone benches topped a circle of four steps that ran down to a fish-pond with moss-grown flags. On the left, the same well raised its wrought-iron roof; and, close at hand, the same sun-dial showed its slanting gnomon and its marble face.

The identical scene! And what added to the strangeness of the sight was the memory, obsessing Lupin and myself, of that date of the 15th of April, inscribed in a corner of the picture, and the thought that this very day was the 15th of April and that sixteen or seventeen people, so different in age, condition and manners, had chosen the 15th of April to come together in this forgotten corner of Paris!

All of them, at the moment when we caught sight of them, were sitting in separate groups on the benches and steps; and all were eating. Not very far from my neighbour and her daughter, the workman's family and the beggar couple were sharing their provisions; while the footman, the gentleman in the soiled suit, the infantry corporal and the two lean sisters were making a common stock of their sliced ham, their tins of sardines and their gruyère cheese.

The lady with the little dog alone, who had brought no food with her, sat apart from the others, who made a show of turning their backs upon her. But Louise d'Ernemont offered her a sandwich, whereupon her example was followed by the two sisters; and the corporal at once began to make himself as agreeable to the young person as he could.

It was now half-past one. The beggar-man took out his pipe, as did the fat gentleman; and, when they found that one had no tobacco and the other no matches, their needs soon brought them together. The men went and smoked by the rotunda and the women joined them. For that matter, all these people seemed to know one another quite well.

They were at some distance from where we were standing, so that we could not hear what they said. However, we gradually perceived that the conversation was becoming animated. The young person with the dog, in particular, who by this time appeared to be in great request, indulged in much voluble talk, accompanying her words with many gestures, which set the little dog barking furiously.

But, suddenly, there was an outcry, promptly followed by shouts of rage; and one and all, men and women alike, rushed in disorder toward the well. One of the workman's brats was at that moment coming out of it, fastened by his belt to the hook at the end of the rope; and the three other urchins were drawing him up by turning the handle. More active than the rest, the corporal flung himself upon him; and forthwith the footman and the fat gentleman seized hold of him also, while the beggars and the lean sisters came to blows with the workman and his family.

In a few seconds the little boy had not a stitch left on him beyond his shirt. The footman, who had taken possession of the rest of the clothes, ran away, pursued by the corporal, who snatched away the boy's breeches, which were next torn from the corporal by one of the lean sisters.

"They are mad!" I muttered, feeling absolutely at sea.

"Not at all, not at all," said Lupin.

"What! Do you mean to say that you can make head or tail of what is going on?"

He did not reply. The young lady with the little dog, tucking her pet under her arm, had started running after the child in the shirt, who uttered loud yells. The two of them raced round the laurel-clump in

which we stood hidden; and the brat flung himself into his mother's arms.

At long last, Louise d'Ernemont, who had played a conciliatory part from the beginning, succeeded in allaying the tumult. Everybody sat down again; but there was a reaction in all those exasperated people and they remained motionless and silent, as though worn out with their exertions.

And time went by. Losing patience and beginning to feel the pangs of hunger, I went to the Rue Raynouard to fetch something to eat, which we divided while watching the actors in the incomprehensible comedy that was being performed before our eyes. They hardly stirred. Each minute that passed seemed to load them with increasing melancholy; and they sank into attitudes of discouragement, bent their backs more and more and sat absorbed in their meditations.

The afternoon wore on in this way, under a grey sky that shed a dreary light over the enclosure.

"Are they going to spend the night here?" I asked, in a bored voice.

But, at five o'clock or so, the fat gentleman in the soiled jacket-suit took out his watch. The others did the same and all, watch in hand, seemed to be anxiously awaiting an event of no little importance to themselves. The event did not take place, for, in fifteen or twenty minutes, the fat gentleman gave a gesture of despair, stood up and put on his hat.

Then lamentations broke forth. The two lean sisters and the workman's wife fell upon their knees and made the sign of the cross. The lady with the little dog and the beggar-woman kissed each other and sobbed; and we saw Louise d'Ernemont pressing her daughter sadly to her.

"Let's go," said Lupin.

"You think it's over?"

"Yes; and we have only just time to make ourselves scarce."

We went out unmolested. At the top of the lane, Lupin turned to the left and, leaving me outside, entered the first house in the Rue Raynouard, the one that backed on to the enclosure.

After talking for a few seconds to the porter, he joined me and we stopped a passing taxi-cab:

"No. 34 Rue de Turin," he said to the driver.

The ground-floor of No. 34 was occupied by a notary's office; and we were shown in, almost without waiting, to Maître Valandier, a smiling, pleasant-spoken man of a certain age.

Lupin introduced himself by the name of Captain Jeanniot, retired from the army. He said that he wanted to build a house to his own liking and that some one had suggested to him a plot of ground situated near the Rue Raynouard.

"But that plot is not for sale," said Maître Valandier.

"Oh, I was told...."

"You have been misinformed, I fear."

The lawyer rose, went to a cupboard and returned with a picture which he showed us. I was petrified. It was the same picture which I had bought, the same picture that hung in Louise d'Ernemont's room.

"This is a painting," he said, "of the plot of ground to which you refer. It is known as the Clos d'Ernemont."

"Precisely."

"Well, this close," continued the notary, "once formed part of a large garden belonging to d'Ernemont, the farmer-general, who was executed during the Terror. All that could be sold has been sold, piecemeal, by the heirs. But this last plot has remained and will remain in their joint possession ... unless...."

The notary began to laugh.

"Unless what?" asked Lupin.

"Well, it's quite a romance, a rather curious romance, in fact. I often amuse myself by looking through the voluminous documents of the case."

"Would it be indiscreet, if I asked ...?"

"Not at all, not at all," declared Maître Valandier, who seemed delighted, on the contrary, to have found a listener for his story. And, without waiting to be pressed, he began: "At the outbreak of the Revolution, Louis Agrippa d'Ernemont, on the pretence of joining his wife, who was staying at Geneva with their daughter Pauline, shut up his mansion in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, dismissed his servants and, with his son Charles, came and took up his abode in his pleasure-house at Passy, where he was known to nobody except an old and devoted serving-woman. He remained there in hiding for three years and he had every reason to hope that his retreat would not be discovered, when, one day, after luncheon, as he was having a nap, the old servant burst into his room. She had seen, at the end of the street, a patrol of armed men who

seemed to be making for the house. Louis d'Ernemont got ready quickly and, at the moment when the men were knocking at the front door, disappeared through the door that led to the garden, shouting to his son, in a scared voice, to keep them talking, if only for five minutes. He may have intended to escape and found the outlets through the garden watched. In any case, he returned in six or seven minutes, replied very calmly to the questions put to him and raised no difficulty about accompanying the men. His son Charles, although only eighteen years of age, was arrested also."

"When did this happen?" asked Lupin.

"It happened on the 26th day of Germinal, Year II, that is to say, on the...."

Maître Valandier stopped, with his eyes fixed on a calendar that hung on the wall, and exclaimed:

"Why, it was on this very day! This is the 15th of April, the anniversary of the farmer-general's arrest."

"What an odd coincidence!" said Lupin. "And considering the period at which it took place, the arrest, no doubt, had serious consequences?"

"Oh, most serious!" said the notary, laughing. "Three months later, at the beginning of Thermidor, the farmer-general mounted the scaffold. His son Charles was forgotten in prison and their property was confiscated."

"The property was immense, I suppose?" said Lupin.

"Well, there you are! That's just where the thing becomes complicated. The property, which was, in fact, immense, could never be traced. It was discovered that the Faubourg Saint-Germain mansion had been sold, before the Revolution, to an Englishman, together with all the country-

seats and estates and all the jewels, securities and collections belonging to the farmer-general. The Convention instituted minute inquiries, as did the Directory afterward. But the inquiries led to no result."

"There remained, at any rate, the Passy house," said Lupin.

"The house at Passy was bought, for a mere song, by a delegate of the Commune, the very man who had arrested d'Ernemont, one Citizen Broquet. Citizen Broquet shut himself up in the house, barricaded the doors, fortified the walls and, when Charles d'Ernemont was at last set free and appeared outside, received him by firing a musket at him. Charles instituted one law-suit after another, lost them all and then proceeded to offer large sums of money. But Citizen Broquet proved intractable. He had bought the house and he stuck to the house; and he would have stuck to it until his death, if Charles had not obtained the support of Bonaparte. Citizen Broquet cleared out on the 12th of February, 1803; but Charles d'Ernemont's joy was so great and his brain, no doubt, had been so violently unhinged by all that he had gone through, that, on reaching the threshold of the house of which he had at last recovered the ownership, even before opening the door he began to dance and sing in the street. He had gone clean off his head."

"By Jove!" said Lupin. "And what became of him?"

"His mother and his sister Pauline, who had ended by marrying a cousin of the same name at Geneva, were both dead. The old servant-woman took care of him and they lived together in the Passy house. Years passed without any notable event; but, suddenly, in 1812, an unexpected incident happened. The old servant made a series of strange revelations on her death-bed, in the presence of two witnesses whom she sent for. She declared that the farmer-general had carried to his house at Passy a number of bags filled with gold and silver and that those bags had

disappeared a few days before the arrest. According to earlier confidences made by Charles d'Ernemont, who had them from his father, the treasures were hidden in the garden, between the rotunda, the sun-dial and the well. In proof of her statement, she produced three pictures, or rather, for they were not yet framed, three canvases, which the farmer-general had painted during his captivity and which he had succeeded in conveying to her, with instructions to hand them to his wife, his son and his daughter. Tempted by the lure of wealth, Charles and the old servant had kept silence. Then came the law-suits, the recovery of the house, Charles's madness, the servant's own useless searches; and the treasures were still there."

"And they are there now," chuckled Lupin.

"And they will be there always," exclaimed Maître Valandier. "Unless ... unless Citizen Broquet, who no doubt smelt a rat, succeeded in ferreting them out. But this is an unlikely supposition, for Citizen Broquet died in extreme poverty."

"So then ...?"

"So then everybody began to hunt. The children of Pauline, the sister, hastened from Geneva. It was discovered that Charles had been secretly married and that he had sons. All these heirs set to work."

"But Charles himself?"

"Charles lived in the most absolute retirement. He did not leave his room."

"Never?"

"Well, that is the most extraordinary, the most astounding part of the story. Once a year, Charles d'Ernemont, impelled by a sort of

subconscious will-power, came downstairs, took the exact road which his father had taken, walked across the garden and sat down either on the steps of the rotunda, which you see here, in the picture, or on the kerb of the well. At twenty-seven minutes past five, he rose and went indoors again; and until his death, which occurred in 1820, he never once failed to perform this incomprehensible pilgrimage. Well, the day on which this happened was invariably the 15th of April, the anniversary of the arrest."

Maître Valandier was no longer smiling and himself seemed impressed by the amazing story which he was telling us.

"And, since Charles's death?" asked Lupin, after a moment's reflection.

"Since that time," replied the lawyer, with a certain solemnity of manner, "for nearly a hundred years, the heirs of Charles and Pauline d'Ernemont have kept up the pilgrimage of the 15th of April. During the first few years they made the most thorough excavations. Every inch of the garden was searched, every clod of ground dug up. All this is now over. They take hardly any pains. All they do is, from time to time, for no particular reason, to turn over a stone or explore the well. For the most part, they are content to sit down on the steps of the rotunda, like the poor madman; and, like him, they wait. And that, you see, is the sad part of their destiny. In those hundred years, all these people who have succeeded one another, from father to son, have lost—what shall I say? —the energy of life. They have no courage left, no initiative. They wait. They wait for the 15th of April; and, when the 15th of April comes, they wait for a miracle to take place. Poverty has ended by overtaking every one of them. My predecessors and I have sold first the house, in order to build another which yields a better rent, followed by bits of the garden and further bits. But, as to that corner over there," pointing to the picture, "they would rather die than sell it. On this they are all agreed:

Louise d'Ernemont, who is the direct heiress of Pauline, as well as the beggars, the workman, the footman, the circus-rider and so on, who represent the unfortunate Charles."

There was a fresh pause; and Lupin asked:

"What is your own opinion, Maître Valandier?"

"My private opinion is that there's nothing in it. What credit can we give to the statements of an old servant enfeebled by age? What importance can we attach to the crotchets of a madman? Besides, if the farmer-general had realized his fortune, don't you think that that fortune would have been found? One could manage to hide a paper, a document, in a confined space like that, but not treasures."

"Still, the pictures?..."

"Yes, of course. But, after all, are they a sufficient proof?"

Lupin bent over the copy which the solicitor had taken from the cupboard and, after examining it at length, said:

"You spoke of three pictures."

"Yes, the one which you see was handed to my predecessor by the heirs of Charles. Louise d'Ernemont possesses another. As for the third, no one knows what became of it."

Lupin looked at me and continued:

"And do they all bear the same date?"

"Yes, the date inscribed by Charles d'Ernemont when he had them framed, not long before his death.... The same date, that is to say the 15th of April, Year II, according to the revolutionary calendar, as the arrest took place in April, 1794."

"Oh, yes, of course," said Lupin. "The figure 2 means...."

He thought for a few moments and resumed:

"One more question, if I may. Did no one ever come forward to solve the problem?"

Maître Valandier threw up his arms:

"Goodness gracious me!" he cried. "Why, it was the plague of the office! One of my predecessors, Maître Turbon, was summoned to Passy no fewer than eighteen times, between 1820 and 1843, by the groups of heirs, whom fortune-tellers, clairvoyants, visionaries, impostors of all sorts had promised that they would discover the farmer-general's treasures. At last, we laid down a rule: any outsider applying to institute a search was to begin by depositing a certain sum."

"What sum?"

"A thousand francs."

"And did this have the effect of frightening them off?"

"No. Four years ago, an Hungarian hypnotist tried the experiment and made me waste a whole day. After that, we fixed the deposit at five thousand francs. In case of success, a third of the treasure goes to the finder. In case of failure, the deposit is forfeited to the heirs. Since then, I have been left in peace."

"Here are your five thousand francs."

The lawyer gave a start:

"Eh? What do you say?"

"I say," repeated Lupin, taking five bank-notes from his pocket and calmly spreading them on the table, "I say that here is the deposit of five thousand francs. Please give me a receipt and invite all the d'Ernemont heirs to meet me at Passy on the 15th of April next year."

The notary could not believe his senses. I myself, although Lupin had accustomed me to these surprises, was utterly taken back.

"Are you serious?" asked Maître Valandier.

"Perfectly serious."

"But, you know, I told you my opinion. All these improbable stories rest upon no evidence of any kind."

"I don't agree with you," said Lupin.

The notary gave him the look which we give to a person who is not quite right in his head. Then, accepting the situation, he took his pen and drew up a contract on stamped paper, acknowledging the payment of the deposit by Captain Jeanniot and promising him a third of such moneys as he should discover:

"If you change your mind," he added, "you might let me know a week before the time comes. I shall not inform the d'Ernemont family until the last moment, so as not to give those poor people too long a spell of hope."

"You can inform them this very day, Maître Valandier. It will make them spend a happier year."

We said good-bye. Outside, in the street, I cried:

"So you have hit upon something?"

"I?" replied Lupin. "Not a bit of it! And that's just what amuses me."

"But they have been searching for a hundred years!"

"It is not so much a matter of searching as of thinking. Now I have three hundred and sixty-five days to think in. It is a great deal more than I want; and I am afraid that I shall forget all about the business, interesting though it may be. Oblige me by reminding me, will you?"

I reminded him of it several times during the following months, though he never seemed to attach much importance to the matter. Then came a long period during which I had no opportunity of seeing him. It was the period, as I afterward learnt, of his visit to Armenia and of the terrible struggle on which he embarked against Abdul the Damned, a struggle which ended in the tyrant's downfall.

I used to write to him, however, at the address which he gave me and I was thus able to send him certain particulars which I had succeeded in gathering, here and there, about my neighbour Louise d'Ernemont, such as the love which she had conceived, a few years earlier, for a very rich young man, who still loved her, but who had been compelled by his family to throw her over; the young widow's despair, and the plucky life which she led with her little daughter.

Lupin replied to none of my letters. I did not know whether they reached him; and, meantime, the date was drawing near and I could not help

wondering whether his numerous undertakings would not prevent him from keeping the appointment which he himself had fixed.

As a matter of fact, the morning of the 15th of April arrived and Lupin was not with me by the time I had finished lunch. It was a quarter-past twelve. I left my flat and took a cab to Passy.

I had no sooner entered the lane than I saw the workman's four brats standing outside the door in the wall. Maître Valandier, informed by them of my arrival, hastened in my direction:

"Well?" he cried. "Where's Captain Jeanniot?"

"Hasn't he come?"

"No; and I can assure you that everybody is very impatient to see him."

The different groups began to crowd round the lawyer; and I noticed that all those faces which I recognized had thrown off the gloomy and despondent expression which they wore a year ago.

"They are full of hope," said Maître Valandier, "and it is my fault. But what could I do? Your friend made such an impression upon me that I spoke to these good people with a confidence ... which I cannot say I feel. However, he seems a queer sort of fellow, this Captain Jeanniot of yours...."

He asked me many questions and I gave him a number of more or less fanciful details about the captain, to which the heirs listened, nodding their heads in appreciation of my remarks.

"Of course, the truth was bound to be discovered sooner or later," said the fat gentleman, in a tone of conviction.

The infantry corporal, dazzled by the captain's rank, did not entertain a doubt in his mind.

The lady with the little dog wanted to know if Captain Jeanniot was young.

But Louise d'Ernemont said:

"And suppose he does not come?"

"We shall still have the five thousand francs to divide," said the beggar-man.

For all that, Louise d'Ernemont's words had damped their enthusiasm. Their faces began to look sullen and I felt an atmosphere as of anguish weighing upon us.

At half-past one, the two lean sisters felt faint and sat down. Then the fat gentleman in the soiled suit suddenly rounded on the notary:

"It's you, Maître Valandier, who are to blame.... You ought to have brought the captain here by main force.... He's a humbug, that's quite clear."

He gave me a savage look, and the footman, in his turn, flung muttered curses at me.

I confess that their reproaches seemed to me well-founded and that Lupin's absence annoyed me greatly:

"He won't come now," I whispered to the lawyer.

And I was thinking of beating a retreat, when the eldest of the brats appeared at the door, yelling:

THE SIGN OF THE SHADOW

"There's some one coming!... A motor-cycle!..."

A motor was throbbing on the other side of the wall. A man on a motor-bicycle came tearing down the lane at the risk of breaking his neck. Suddenly, he put on his brakes, outside the door, and sprang from his machine.

Under the layer of dust which covered him from head to foot, we could see that his navy-blue reefer-suit, his carefully creased trousers, his black felt hat and patent-leather boots were not the clothes in which a man usually goes cycling.

"But that's not Captain Jeanniot!" shouted the notary, who failed to recognize him.

"Yes, it is," said Lupin, shaking hands with us. "I'm Captain Jeanniot right enough ... only I've shaved off my moustache.... Besides, Maître Valandier, here's your receipt."

He caught one of the workman's children by the arm and said:

"Run to the cab-rank and fetch a taxi to the corner of the Rue Raynouard. Look sharp! I have an urgent appointment to keep at two o'clock, or a quarter-past at the latest."

There was a murmur of protest. Captain Jeanniot took out his watch:

"Well! It's only twelve minutes to two! I have a good quarter of an hour before me. But, by Jingo, how tired I feel! And how hungry into the bargain!"

The corporal thrust his ammunition-bread into Lupin's hand; and he munched away at it as he sat down and said:

"You must forgive me. I was in the Marseilles express, which left the rails between Dijon and Laroche. There were twelve people killed and any number injured, whom I had to help. Then I found this motor-cycle in the luggage-van.... Maître Valandier, you must be good enough to restore it to the owner. You will find the label fastened to the handle-bar. Ah, you're back, my boy! Is the taxi there? At the corner of the Rue Raynouard? Capital!"

He looked at his watch again:

"Hullo! No time to lose!"

I stared at him with eager curiosity. But how great must the excitement of the d'Ernemont heirs have been! True, they had not the same faith in Captain Jeanniot that I had in Lupin. Nevertheless, their faces were pale and drawn. Captain Jeanniot turned slowly to the left and walked up to the sun-dial. The pedestal represented the figure of a man with a powerful torso, who bore on his shoulders a marble slab the surface of which had been so much worn by time that we could hardly distinguish the engraved lines that marked the hours. Above the slab, a Cupid, with outspread wings, held an arrow that served as a gnomon.

The captain stood leaning forward for a minute, with attentive eyes.

Then he said:

"Somebody lend me a knife, please."

A clock in the neighbourhood struck two. At that exact moment, the shadow of the arrow was thrown upon the sunlit dial along the line of a crack in the marble which divided the slab very nearly in half.

The captain took the knife handed to him. And with the point, very gently, he began to scratch the mixture of earth and moss that filled the narrow cleft.

Almost immediately, at a couple of inches from the edge, he stopped, as though his knife had encountered an obstacle, inserted his thumb and forefinger and withdrew a small object which he rubbed between the palms of his hands and gave to the lawyer:

"Here, Maître Valandier. Something to go on with."

It was an enormous diamond, the size of a hazelnut and beautifully cut.

The captain resumed his work. The next moment, a fresh stop. A second diamond, magnificent and brilliant as the first, appeared in sight.

And then came a third and a fourth.

In a minute's time, following the crack from one edge to the other and certainly without digging deeper than half an inch, the captain had taken out eighteen diamonds of the same size.

During this minute, there was not a cry, not a movement around the sun-dial. The heirs seemed paralyzed with a sort of stupor. Then the fat gentleman muttered:

"Geminy!"

And the corporal moaned:

"Oh, captain!... Oh, captain!..."

The two sisters fell in a dead faint. The lady with the little dog dropped on her knees and prayed, while the footman, staggering like a drunken man, held his head in his two hands, and Louise d'Ernemont wept.

When calm was restored and all became eager to thank Captain Jeanniot, they saw that he was gone.

Some years passed before I had an opportunity of talking to Lupin about this business. He was in a confidential vein and answered:

"The business of the eighteen diamonds? By Jove, when I think that three or four generations of my fellow-men had been hunting for the solution! And the eighteen diamonds were there all the time, under a little mud and dust!"

"But how did you guess?..."

"I did not guess. I reflected. I doubt if I need even have reflected. I was struck, from the beginning, by the fact that the whole circumstance was governed by one primary question: the question of time. When Charles d'Ernemont was still in possession of his wits, he wrote a date upon the three pictures. Later, in the gloom in which he was struggling, a faint glimmer of intelligence led him every year to the centre of the old garden; and the same faint glimmer led him away from it every year at the same moment, that is to say, at twenty-seven minutes past five. Something must have acted on the disordered machinery of his brain in this way. What was the superior force that controlled the poor madman's movements? Obviously, the instinctive notion of time represented by the sun-dial in the farmer-general's pictures. It was the annual revolution of the earth around the sun that brought Charles d'Ernemont back to the garden at a fixed date. And it was the earth's daily revolution upon its own axis that took him from it at a fixed hour, that is to say, at the hour, most likely, when the sun, concealed by objects different from those of to-day, ceased to light the Passy garden. Now of all this the sun-dial was the symbol. And that is why I at once knew where to look."

"But how did you settle the hour at which to begin looking?"

"Simply by the pictures. A man living at that time, such as Charles d'Ernemont, would have written either 26 Germinal, Year II, or else 15 April, 1794, but not 15 April, Year II. I was astounded that no one had thought of that."

"Then the figure 2 stood for two o'clock?"

"Evidently. And what must have happened was this: the farmer-general began by turning his fortune into solid gold and silver money. Then, by way of additional precaution, with this gold and silver he bought eighteen wonderful diamonds. When he was surprised by the arrival of the patrol, he fled into his garden. Which was the best place to hide the diamonds? Chance caused his eyes to light upon the sun-dial. It was two o'clock. The shadow of the arrow was then falling along the crack in the marble. He obeyed this sign of the shadow, rammed his eighteen diamonds into the dust and calmly went back and surrendered to the soldiers."

"But the shadow of the arrow coincides with the crack in the marble every day of the year and not only on the 15th of April."

"You forget, my dear chap, that we are dealing with a lunatic and that he remembered only this date of the 15th of April."

"Very well; but you, once you had solved the riddle, could easily have made your way into the enclosure and taken the diamonds."

"Quite true; and I should not have hesitated, if I had had to do with people of another description. But I really felt sorry for those poor wretches. And then you know the sort of idiot that Lupin is. The idea of appearing suddenly as a benevolent genius and amazing his kind would be enough to make him commit any sort of folly."

"Tah!" I cried. "The folly was not so great as all that. Six magnificent diamonds! How delighted the d'Ernemont heirs must have been to fulfil their part of the contract!"

Lupin looked at me and burst into uncontrollable laughter:

"So you haven't heard? Oh, what a joke! The delight of the d'Ernemont heirs!.... Why, my dear fellow, on the next day, that worthy Captain Jeanniot had so many mortal enemies! On the very next day, the two lean sisters and the fat gentleman organized an opposition. A contract? Not worth the paper it was written on, because, as could easily be proved, there was no such person as Captain Jeanniot. Where did that adventurer spring from? Just let him sue them and they'd soon show him what was what!"

"Louise d'Ernemont too?"

"No, Louise d'Ernemont protested against that piece of rascality. But what could she do against so many? Besides, now that she was rich, she got back her young man. I haven't heard of her since."

"So ...?"

"So, my dear fellow, I was caught in a trap, with not a leg to stand on, and I had to compromise and accept one modest diamond as my share, the smallest and the least handsome of the lot. That comes of doing one's best to help people!"

And Lupin grumbled between his teeth:

"Oh, gratitude!... All humbug!... Where should we honest men be if we had not our conscience and the satisfaction of duty performed to reward us?"

FIN

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EDITH SWAN-NECK

Arsène Lupin

Fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created by French writer Maurice Leblanc

Arsène Lupin is a fictional gentleman thief and master of disguise created in 1905 by French writer Maurice Leblanc. The character was first introduced in a series of short stories serialized in the magazine Je sais tout. The first story, "The Arrest of Arsène Lupin", was published on 15 July 1905. Lupin is often described as the criminal counterpart to Sherlock Holmes, often encountering "Herlock Sholmès" in his own adventures. The character has also appeared in a number of books by other writers as well as numerous films, stage plays,